

Sgt. Chance D. Ragsdale of 2nd Platoon, 211th Engineer Company (Sappers), South Dakota Army National Guard, waves a truck through a traffic control point in Paktika Province, Afghanistan.



## Consistent Stability

### South Dakota Soldiers provide comforting presence in eastern Afghanistan

**Story & photos by**  
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**F**or National Guard units operating in some of Afghanistan's meanest regions, sometimes – like back home – just being a presence is enough.

It's enough, for instance, to provide reassurance to citizens, while at the same time sending a strong message to the enemy, that America and its military are committed to creating a long-term, stable environment in this war-torn country.

So it isn't surprising that the mission of South Dakota's 2nd Platoon, 211th Engineer

Company (Sappers) was all about providing reassurance on its latest mission here in eastern Afghanistan.

Normally a route clearance team whose primary purpose is to hunt improvised explosive devices (IEDs), the chief danger to U.S., NATO and Afghan forces, the Punishers – as they are called – took on a different challenge this time.

On this day 2nd Platoon would conduct what is often termed a "presence patrol" – a task designed to demonstrate visibility, both to Afghan civilians and to the insurgent enemy, for the purposes of providing security and, in no small measure, confidence. Instead of exclusively searching for IEDs, the Punishers set up a traffic control point (TCP) to look

for known insurgents and illicit weapons and bomb-making materials.

It's not a mission they have done very often, but it is an assignment that is no less important to the overall stability of a south-west Asian nation long accustomed to war and violence.

"We are in a direct support role so setting up at TCP is not something we typically do," said 1st Lt. Chris Long, 2nd Platoon leader.

Nevertheless, Long said, just having a regular presence is an important and "effective" tactic to help foster self-assurance among the local population that U.S. and NATO forces, working with the Afghan national government, are committed to providing the

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**-1ST LT. CHRIS LONG, 2ND PLATOON LEADER**

kind of security that is necessary to construct an environment of self-reliance.

“We try to build relationships in the villages that we frequent so they understand we are here to help the Afghan government provide security and services to the population,” Long said.

That strategy was evident the moment Long and his men set up TCPs at either end of their convoy.

Sgt. 1st Class Jon Albers and his men were as concerned about reassuring local Afghan motorists the U.S. patrol was there to help them as they were about making sure none of the vehicles or their occupants posed any threat to the convoy or the nearby village.

Mindful of the bone-chilling cold winds blowing across barren, flat plains flanking the roadway, for example, Sgt. Chance D. “Rags” Ragsdale and Spc. Josh M. Krumm suggested closing the open doors of one vehicle after it had been thoroughly examined, in order to keep an Afghan mother and her infant warm while the Guardsmen talked to her husband.

And during each vehicle stop, Albers always made sure the Afghan interpreter working with the platoon asked drivers and passengers if they were having any problems or issues in their villages that the national government should be aware of, including – but not limited to – security and infrastructure problems.

Finally, with each vehicle the Punishers were mindful to thank drivers and occupants for their cooperation before handing out solar-powered radios as well as government literature that explained President Hamid Karzai’s administration and its efforts to improve the country.

Small gestures, indeed, but big enough, it is hoped, to have the potential to carry great weight among a skeptical population.

In a country where generations have grown up knowing only war, no one is more aware than Afghans that there are no guarantees of a better life – and it wouldn’t matter if someone were promising such a thing, not many Afghans would believe it.

Here, actions speak louder than words, especially when so many words for generations have been little more than empty promises. But as long as everyday Afghans are seeing legitimate efforts by units like the 211th to improve their lot in life, they will not only begin to believe in U.S. and Afghan national resolve, they will begin to believe in their own future as well.

And that will bode well for the forces aligned against extremism.

Consistent stability has a way of producing that kind of optimism. 🗿



Sgt. 1st Class Jon Albers works a control point in Afghanistan.

Guardmembers serving overseas (late March)					
OCONUS MISSIONS	ALERTED	MOB	DEPLOYED	DEMOB	TOTAL
OIF/OEF/CONUS*	42,296	3,379	49,438	11,682	106,795
GTMO	945	1	290	21	1,257
BALKANS	7,038	0	1,378	48	8,464
ANA/MFO**	2,700	0	6,345	523	9,568
TOTALS	52,979	3,380	57,451	2,274	126,084
TOTAL T-10					73,105

\* Deployed OIF/OEF/CONUS contains 10,898 Air Guard and 38,540 Army Guard  
 \*\* ANA - Afghanistan National Army / MFO - Multi-National Force Observers (Non-UN)